

Bible Studies for Adventists



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June 6–12, 2009

Commentary on “Stewardship”

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Day 1: Sabbath Afternoon, June 6, 2009

This week's lesson begins with a short passage by R. Scott Rodin about Stewardship. He states that *stewardship* is not just about caring for financial resources—it is more involved. He makes the point that the term *steward* is misunderstood because our modern vocabulary doesn't have a term that carries the richness of this word's meaning.

The companion booklet, *E.G. White Notes for the Sabbath School Lessons*, features a three-paragraph quote from *Testimonies to Ministers*.

Problems

I have no issues with the brief explanation of Stewardship by R. Scott Rodin. The problems in today's lesson are found in the Ellen White quote in the *Notes* booklet.

**"God has not given talents to men capriciously, but according to their God-given ability to use them."
Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers*.**

God does not give talents according to our ability to use them! The Bible says:

Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone... All these are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills (1Cor. 4-6, 11).

God gives gifts "as he wills." The gift and the amount is the sovereign act of God. Another quote from today's passage in the *Notes* booklet is equally in error:

"God requires every human agent to consult the living oracle, and become thoroughly acquainted with His expressed will in all matters, that by diligently using the talents lent him, he may gain others." Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers*.

Nowhere in the Bible is this supported. As stated above in 1Corinthians, God gives as he wills. When we are faithful in the use of God's gifts, the increase is not for us, but for the kingdom of God. In the parable of the talents, the faithful servants didn't keep their increase, but it was all returned to their master.

The last paragraph of the Ellen White quote is even worse. Here is part of it:

"God would have us learn the solemn lesson that we are working out our own destiny. The character we form in this life decides whether or not we are fitted to live through the eternal ages..." Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers*.

We are not saved by how well we form characters. This is salvation by works! We are saved by trusting Jesus' finished work that was accomplished by His substitutionary atonement. We rest from our labors because He did all the work required. Have you trusted Jesus?

Summary

1. God does not give gifts according to our ability to use them.
2. God gives us gifts according to His sovereign will.
3. We are not saved by forming good characters. We are saved by trusting Jesus.

Day 2: Sunday, June 7, 2009

Today's lesson is titled "Talents" and covers the parable of the talents found in Matthew 25:14–30. Here Jesus tells of the man who gave his three servants different amounts of money. Each "according to his ability." Through "trading" two of the servants doubled their master's money, but the one who had received the least hid his master's money and did not even invest it for interest.

Problems

The automatic assumption is made that Jesus is teaching this parable to give a lesson on the use of talents or abilities. Since the parable is about money, maybe Jesus is really teaching something about money. Regardless, what the master gives to each of his servants belongs to the master and is not owned by the servants. Each servant traded the masters' money to increase wealth. The servants did not use any of the principle or gain for themselves—all was saved to be given back to the master when he returned. Not having an increase was grounds for being cast into "outer darkness."

All that we have been given belongs to our Master. We are to invest everything with the goal of gain only for Him. What we have is not for our use—it is all for Him.

Summary

1. God gives to each person according to his/her abilities.
2. What God gives belongs to Him. We are entrusted to use what God gives to create increased value.
3. We are not given assets for our own use. We will be required to give all back to God with an increase.

Day 3: Monday, June 8, 2009

Today's lesson is titled "Time" and deals with time management. Besides suggesting that the student read some books on time management, the lesson suggests we can learn about the Christian's correct use of time by reading the Bible and by studying the life of Jesus. The lesson also says that there must be "balance" in how we divide our time.

Problems

If we understand correctly that all that we have been given belongs to God (see yesterday's commentary), the idea that we can learn how to use our time from secular time management books is ridiculous. The Word of God found in the Bible should be our source of wisdom.

The further idea that by studying the life of Jesus we can know how to use our time is also misleading. He did not come primarily as our example. Jesus came to die for us. He came to be our substitute. We are never going to be anyone's savior! Moreover, if we do look at how Jesus lived, we don't find balance. He took really long walks (Matt. 16:13); he spent long hours in prayer (Luke 6:12); fasted 40 days (Matt. 4:2), and preached through meal time (Matt. 14:14-21).

"...the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28).

The majority of the lesson deals with imitating Jesus. One of the first behaviors of Jesus mentioned was his not missing the blessings of the Sabbath, and implying that we must also keep the Sabbath to avoid missing blessings. This is not Biblical. Jesus IS our Sabbath rest. We don't go to a day—we go to Jesus:

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28).

In the New Covenant there is no command to keep a specific day of worship. For further study on the Sabbath, go here. For a study on the covenants, both old and new, go here.

The idea of living a "balanced" life is presented in the last paragraph. Balanced living is not taught in the Bible—it is an idea borrowed from Buddhism. One of the faculty members at the Loma Linda University School of Dentistry who is Buddhist once explained the concept to me of how he must attempt to balance his life—keeping the yin and yang equal. The Bible, in stark contrast, teaches submission. All we are and all we have is completely God's. We humbly submit our all to our Lord Jesus. All of our time belongs to Him and we use it as he directs.

Summary

1. Time management books are not the source of wisdom for the Christian.
2. Jesus did not come primarily as our example. His mission was to save us by dying in our place.
3. The concept of balanced living is not biblical. The Bible teaches submission.

Day 4: Tuesday, June 9, 2009

This day's lesson says that care of the body is one of the most important disciplines we can practice because it gives God access to us by keeping us healthy so we can think clearly, perceive right and wrong, and make good decisions.

Problems

The biggest problem with this lesson is its focus on the physical nature of man which underscores the failure of Adventism to believe in the existence of a human spirit. This understanding denies the possibility that the extremely ill, the chronically malnourished, or the developmentally disabled can have a saving relationship with Jesus or that they are able to know the difference between right and wrong. The Bible says that spiritual things are not discerned by mental prowess:

"The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned." 1Cr 2:14

In contrast to the lesson's focus on diet, Jesus' teaching was that all foods are clean. When the Pharisees confronted Jesus about eating without ritually washing His hands, Jesus said it is not what goes into a person but what comes out of him that makes him unclean. He said,

"Then are you also without understanding? Do you not see that whatever goes into a person from outside cannot defile him, since it enters not his heart but his stomach, and is expelled?" (Thus he declared all foods clean)" Mark 7:18-19.

Moreover, teachings such as Adventism's health message are specifically condemned by the Bible: Paul says,

"Now the Spirit expressly says that in later times some will depart from the faith by devoting themselves to deceitful spirits and teachings of demons, through the insincerity of liars whose consciences are seared, who forbid marriage and require abstinence from foods that God created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth. For everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, for it is made holy by the word of God and prayer" (1 Tim 4:1-5).

Paul further elaborates that physical discipline has nothing to do with our ability to hear the Holy Spirit:

"If you put these things before the brothers, you will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, being trained in the words of the faith and of the good doctrine that you have followed. Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come" (1 Tim 4:6-8)

The Adventist emphasis on physical health and discipline puts it in the ranks of many non-biblically-based religions and philosophies such as Mormonism, Islam, and Buddhism which abstain from certain foods and meats as part of their spiritual practices.

Summary

1. The basis for Adventism's error in focussing on physical health is a consequence of not believing that humans are composed of a physical body and a spirit.
2. Contrary to the Adventist health message, all foods are clean.
3. Forbidding any foods is a doctrine of demons.
4. Physical training is of little value; we are to train for godliness.

Day 5: Wednesday, June 10, 2009

This lesson argues that God owns everything, but He expects us to give tithes and offerings of at least 10%. Blessings will follow our faithfulness in giving.

Problems

In all of Paul's letters, he never taught a formula for giving. Instead, the New Testament teaches generosity and honesty:

"The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. As it is written, 'He has distributed freely, he has given to the poor; his righteousness endures forever.' He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for all your generosity, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God" (2 Cor. 9:6-11).

Now let's look at what Luke records about Jesus' comments on giving,

"Jesus looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the offering box, and he saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. And he said, 'Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on'" (Luke 21:1-4).

Jesus was not establishing a formula for giving. The woman in the passage was a widow; she had no man responsible for her. She was trusting God as her Provider, and in her total devotion to Him, she trusted Him with everything she had. This devotion and trust and dependence on God were what Jesus commended to His disciples.

Finally, the story of Ananias and Sapphira demonstrates a new covenant principle of honesty with God concerning one's finances and giving.

"But Peter said, 'Ananias, why has Satan filled your heart to lie to the Holy Spirit and to keep back for yourself part of the proceeds of the land? While it remained unsold, did it not remain your own? And after it was sold, was it not at your disposal? Why is it that you have contrived this deed in your heart? You have not lied to men but to God.' When Ananias heard these words, he fell down and breathed his last. And great fear came upon all who heard of it.... After an interval of about three hours his wife came in, not knowing what had happened. And Peter said to her, 'Tell me whether you sold the land for so much.' And she said, 'Yes, for so much.' But Peter said to her, 'How is it that you have agreed together to test the Spirit of the Lord? Behold, the feet of those who have buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out.' Immediately she fell down at his feet and breathed her last. When the young men came in they found her dead, and they carried her out and buried her beside her husband" (ACTS 5:3-10).

This story illustrates God's authority in His church. His presence is realized by the Holy Spirit's indwelling of each born-again member. Each member must be honest regarding his own commitments to the church because a commitment to Christ's church is a commitment not merely to church leaders or an organization but to God Himself. One cannot think he can deceive the Holy Spirit.

Summary

1. In the new covenant church there is no formula for giving except generosity.
2. Jesus taught total trust and dependence upon God in our giving Him everything we have.
3. We are obligated to honesty and transparency in our finances because we as believers cannot lie to the Holy Spirit.

Day 6: Thursday, June 11, 2009

Thursday's lesson is about waiting. While we wait for Jesus to come back, the lesson makes the point—using the parable of the talents as an illustration and Ellen White as a source—that we are to balance our lives between "waiting and watching and work".

Problems

First, the parable of the talents is not about how we spend our time waiting for the second coming; rather, it teaches how we use our money as faithful servants of the Master.

Second, Paul tells us how to spend our time waiting for the Lord's return in 1 Corinthians 4:11-16:

"To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are poorly dressed and buffeted and homeless, and we labor, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we entreat. We have become, and are still, like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things. I do not write these things to make you ashamed, but to admonish you as my beloved children. For though you have countless guides in Christ, you do not have many fathers. For I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel. I urge you, then, be imitators of me" (1 Corinthians 4:11-16).

In many areas of the world, Christ-followers are suffering for Jesus just as Paul did. The Bible gives no hint of the pagan teaching of balance as we wait for Jesus to come. Jesus' orders were to make disciples and baptize (Matt 28:19-20), and Paul said,

"For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Ephesians 2:10).

Summary

1. The parable of the talents does not teach us principles for waiting.
2. While waiting for Jesus to come, we are to endure, entreat, admonish, and imitate Paul, our apostle to the Gentiles.
3. We were created for good works which God foreordained for us.

Day 7: Friday, June 12, 2009

Friday is a summary of the week's lesson using Counsels on Stewardship as a resource to support the week's points. The four discussion questions follow with biblical answers:

1. How are we to understand the whole question of stewardship and accountability to God in the context of salvation by faith alone? Are we saved by what good stewards we are? Or does our stewardship reveal the reality of our faith? And even if we make mistakes here, why should we not give up in despair?

A. Our behaviors, including stewardship, follow our belief and trust in Jesus. Stewardship has nothing to do with our salvation. It flows from being saved and reflects our recognition that everything we have belongs to God.

2. What's wrong with what's been dubbed the "health and wealth gospel," the idea that if you live right, God will give you lots of money and good health? How is this a perversion of true principles of stewardship?

A. It's interesting that Adventists take a position against the "health and wealth" gospel but teach a similar one. Adventists have many stories of people being blessed for paying a faithful tithe. If Adventists suffer financially, they are told to make sure they are paying a faithful tithe and giving offerings; if they do these things, it is implied, they will receive financial blessings.

3. Discuss the following statement: "The greatest, most gifted people are useless if they don't make themselves available to be used by God. In short, availability is more important than ability."—Mike Nappa, The Courage to Be a Christian (West Monroe, La.: Howard Publishing Co., 2001), p.164.

A. People can achieve amazing accomplishments by using their abilities. Work for the kingdom of God, though, is not possible unless a person is filled with the Holy Spirit and submitted to His direction.

4. What advice do you give to a church member who, struggling through hard financial times, says that he or she just can't afford to pay tithe, much less give offerings? What various approaches could or should be taken with this person?

A. Tithe is not a part of the new covenant. The first approach to such a person should be to ask if he or she has accepted the Lord Jesus as Savior and Lord. After a person has been born again, encourage him/her to take a Bible-based financial management class and to ask God to show him/her how to manage his/her money. Again, tithe is not a part of the new covenant. Instead, we submit everything we have to Him.

Summary

1. Stewardship has nothing to do with salvation.
2. God is not a vending machine. We do not give because of what we might get but as an act of worship.
3. A Spirit-filled life comes before work for God's kingdom is possible.
4. Tithe is not a part of the new covenant. Instead, we submit everything we have to Him.